

Reading 15

The magic of reading

Bruno Bettelheim and Karen Zelan

Bettelheim and Zelan criticize the reason many give for learning to read; namely that it makes us more useful citizens and workers. They don't deny that this is true, but develop a strong case as to why such an argument can never serve as a motivation for learning to read.

Instead, they argue, learners are motivated by the 'magic' of reading. They read because it 'promises' them an entry into an exciting fantasy world. The writers argue that we are all *originally* motivated by these kinds of 'irrational' desires.

The task of the teacher is to recognize this human fact and teach reading through books that evoke this 'magic'. They argue that school story books – primers – don't do this because they are designed to teach learners to *read only* – they aren't imaginative enough – and don't offer learners any 'magic'. Learners also see them as meaningless. They recognize that their only point is to teach them what a 'C' is, or how to pronounce 'C–A–T', and that they have no longer-term meaning.

Notes

Why it isn't useful to justify reading in terms of its usefulness

Being able to read well is of great practical use in our society and the world. Unfortunately, however, this is the main reason teachers give children when announcing that they must learn to read. Reading is taught in ways that not only completely obfuscate the art of literacy but also prevent the child from guessing that it could exist.

Reading

Even teachers who themselves are committed to literacy stress reading's *practical* value when teaching beginners. In doing so they neglect the more elusive but much more important value literacy can have for one's life. Earnest teachers, anxious to secure a better economic life for their students, press them to apply themselves more assiduously to learning reading skills so that they will be able to 'get ahead in the world'.

But children are not strongly motivated by distant future rewards; they are not firmly convinced by this reason.

We must not be led astray by the fact that everybody claims to know that to be able to read is profitable. The fact that people give lip service to such knowledge does not mean it has become part of their outlook on life or that it gives direction to their behaviour. It can remain inoperative knowledge, which they file away in the far recesses of their minds and to which they pay no attention in their everyday lives.

Maybe this can be seen more clearly when considering the teaching of mathematics. Mastering basic mathematical skills is obviously useful; these skills are taught to all children. But despite this usefulness, most children drop their study of mathematics as soon as they have acquired the minimal smattering needed to get by. The reason is that with the emphasis on the practicality of the rudimentary computing skills, nothing in the way the children have been taught mathematics has made them aware of the fascinating world of numbers, or of how mathematics offers the key to a deeper understanding of the world.

Only the few who for some special reason have become sufficiently *entranced* to penetrate beyond its practical uses comprehend what mathematics is really all about. I do not know whether this higher and truer concept of mathematics is potentially available to everybody, but there is no doubt that it could be opened up to a much larger number of students, were it not stressed that mathematics' main merit rests in its practical application.

Reading is about opening up a world of imagination and joy

What is required for a child to be eager to learn to read is [...] a fervent belief that being able to read will open to him a world of wonderful experiences, permit him to shed his ignorance, understand the world, and become master of his fate. For it is *faith* that kindles one's imagination and gives one the strength to undertake the most difficult tasks, even though at the moment one does not quite understand how. Reading will provide one with all these marvellous opportunities.

We would teach reading very differently if we viewed it as the initiation of a novice into a new world of experience: the acquisition of an art that will unlock previously hidden secrets, open the door to gaining wisdom,

and permit sharing in sublime poetic achievements. When learning to read is experienced [...] as the **only way** to be transported into an unknown world, the child's unconscious fascination with imaginary events and magic power will support his conscious efforts at decoding. It will give him strength to master the difficult task of learning to read and become a literate person.

Our thesis is that learning, particularly learning to read, must give the child the feeling that through it **new worlds will be opened to his mind and imagination**.

This would not be difficult if we taught reading differently. Seeing how a child is **lost to the world** and forgets all his worries when reading a **story that fascinates** him, shows how easily young children are captivated by books, provided they are the right ones. When we notice how a child lives in the **fantasy world** of this story even long after he has finished reading it, [provides clues as to how we should teach reading differently].

Literature in the form of religious and other myths was one of man's greatest achievements, since in them he explored for the first time the meaning of his existence and the order of the world. Thus literature began as **visions** of man, and was not created to serve **utilitarian** purposes.

All children are fascinated by visions, by magic, and by secret language, and the beginning of school is the age when the child is most desirous to partake of the secrets of adults.

Satisfaction of these desires was historically contained in religious texts, so children usually learnt to read well from such texts. Mastering reading not only permitted access to superior powers but was the instrument through which we received their messages – those of God in religious writings, and of superior minds in the writings of philosophers, poets, and scientists. When learning to read is experienced in this way, it involves not only the cognitive powers of the child's mind but also his imagination and his emotions. In short, all reaches of his personality.

Learning to read then appeals to the highest and the most primordial aspects of the mind, involving simultaneously id, ego, and superego; our whole personality.

How will the child experience reading?

So there are the two radically different ways in which reading (and the learning of it) can be experienced:

- either as something of great practical value, important if one wants to get ahead in life;
- or as the source of unlimited knowledge and the most moving aesthetic experiences.

Which of these two ways or in what combination of them the child will experience being taught reading, depends on the impressions he receives

from his parents and the atmosphere of his home, and on how reading is taught to him in school. The image of literacy impressed on him by those who significantly shape his views of things during his most impressionable years is decisive. This is so because it is during these early years that a child's basic personality is forming, and he does not yet perceive matters on the basis of a rational and critical evaluation of their objective merits.

There is reason to believe that only those for whom reading was early endowed with some visionary qualities and magic meaning, become literate. Reading and what it can contribute to one's life is not something that pertains only to the ego and the conscious mind; it is also deeply rooted in the unconscious. Those who retain all through life a deep commitment to literacy harbour in their unconscious some residue of their earlier conviction that reading is an art permitting access to magic worlds, although very few of them are aware that they subconsciously believe this to be so.

Consciously, most of us take pride in our rationality, and are correctly convinced that more than anything else it is literacy that lifts us out of irrationality into rationality. That an earlier, childish idea of literacy's magic power may still be at work in us is suggested by what we experience when we are deeply affected by art, poetry, music, and literature, for then we feel touched by magic. It is an irrational attraction, but one that continues to move us throughout our entire lives.

The special fervour with which the astronomer engages in his scientific studies is imbued by remnants of the childish awe that overwhelmed him when first beholding the beauty or the immensity of the sky, if not also its eternity. While he does not look for the answers the astrologer sought – whose work was certainly a magic enterprise, but nevertheless the origin of astronomy – the astronomer still seeks to discover what created the universe, and how. Maybe in the development of the human mind from childhood to maturity, ontogeny parallels phylogeny in some measure or fashion. Magic belief in astrology slowly evolved into the science of astronomy, and alchemy into chemistry.

The good biologist as much as the good physician retains somewhere the feeling of wonder inspired by the miracle of life. However rationally the good physician proceeds when trying to relieve the physical and mental distress from which we suffer when we are sick, however much he relies in his work on his medical knowledge to help us, in our experience of him as a healer he must be tinged in some measure with the magical qualities with which past generations endowed the medicine man.

Note Bettelheim and Zelan argue that however rational and scientific our thinking may be – as doctors, scientists, or astronomers – it all begins with a kind of childish awe. We are fascinated by the seeming magic of life; of birth, death, of the planets etc. From this we develop our more rational and scientific forms of thinking. But, say Bettelheim and Zelan, even the most scientific doctor (for instance)

remains a little influenced by the 'magic' of the sangoma (or traditional healer). It is this deep human attachment to 'magic' and imagination that we need to tap into when we teach reading.

Why we must develop our emotions

The more our rational abilities weaken, the more powerfully our emotions can impinge on us and the more dominant magic thinking becomes. As the child enters school, he is at an age when his rationality is as yet poorly developed, and his *feelings dominate* his thinking. So when something is really important to him, he is apt to invest it with magic, and the more he does so, the more important it will become to him emotionally.

But if he fails to see some magic in what he is doing, he will be little interested in it.

If literature – irrespective of whether it is of a literary, philosophic, or scientific nature – had not been originally endowed with qualities that made it attractive to our *unconscious*, and if it did not still retain for us some of these qualities, we would not be fully committed to it, because an important part of our personality would remain uninvolved. For literature to affect us beyond what can be put easily into words, our response to it must continue to contain traces of the feelings and irrational ideas we projected into so many of our childhood experiences.

To the modern educator, who views learning to read as the acquisition of a particularly important cognitive skill, it may seem a far-fetched idea that this can be mastered well only if initially and for some time to come reading is experienced subconsciously by the child as a magic art, which potentially confers great and in some ways unknown power. Yet it is the child's wish to penetrate what he believes to be the important secrets adults possess that makes learning to read an exciting adventure to him – one so attractive that he is eager to expend the requisite concentration and energy on mastering it.

Here it might be worth remembering again that literature began as poetry, which was part of religion, as in invocations to the gods or rhymes to which magic properties were ascribed. Literature originated in poetry recited and transmitted orally. It often served magic rather than ordinary, utilitarian purposes. Even when script became more common, much of the now recorded literature was still devoted to issues connected with religion – so much so that it could be said, and universally believed, that 'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.'

For millennia, writing and reading were arcane arts that conferred special powers and privileges. It required a long and difficult struggle before the average man was permitted to read the Scriptures, and printing

began with the printing of Bibles and other religious texts. It was from the Good Book that children were taught to read, and only after man was permitted to read the Scriptures did education become universal.

Today, too, for literacy to be a really desirable goal for the young child, it must be endowed by him with magic meaning. Only then will it become fully attractive to his unconscious, which will consequently support the child's conscious efforts to master reading. Later, the irrational aspects of literacy can become safely reduced and the rational ones gain ascendancy. But if this divestment of magical connotations occurs too soon and too radically, reading will not be strongly invested emotionally.

It is not objective merit, but high parental valuation, that makes reading so attractive to the child. This appeal does not emanate from the rational and utilitarian purposes parents may satisfy through reading; rather, the child responds to the parents' emotional absorption in reading. What makes it attractive to him is that it seems to fascinate his parents. It is their secret knowledge that the child wants to be able to share. The more parental devotion to reading and the child's belief in its magic propensities coincide, the easier time a child will have in learning to read, and the more important and enjoyable reading will be to him.

Two ways of teaching reading

It is rare that we find a chance to compare the impact of two different methods of teaching reading. These two ways – one typical of our schools, and another where reading is being taught immediately from a difficult text but one which carried deepest meaning for the child [...] – were evident in the following experiment in Zdvo.

A boy was educated simultaneously at the local public school and at an orthodox Jewish school, or yeshiva, where children are taught reading directly from the Hebrew Bible and have to translate what they read into the vernacular, exactly the way it has been done for hundreds of years. At the yeshiva,

'none of the texts presented to young children are expurgated or bowdlerized. It is in fact forbidden by Jewish Law to abridge, expurgate, or for that matter even to skip over what might be considered controversial passages. Thus children even in the early primary years read unabashedly about the attempt of Potifer's wife to seduce Joseph, of the twins fathered by Judah upon a woman he thought to be a prostitute, and of the rape of Dinah by Schechem.

One day when his father wanted to demonstrate the child's ability to deal with sophisticated material, he asked this six-year-old boy to translate from the book of Genesis for a visitor in our home. The guest would call out chapter and verse, and

after a pause to locate the passage, the young boy would provide a quite accurate translation in his own words.

Our amazed visitor asked if by chance he were not dealing with a bilingual edition, and if he were not stealing an occasional glance at the English. To my embarrassment, I found that I had indeed given him a volume replete with a literal English rendition of each line. I began offering assurance that the boy was not using any crutch, but was in fact reading only the Hebrew original. Groping for a quick proof of my contention, I asked Steven to look at the English text and to read it to me. Obediently, he focused his attention on the other side of the page, stumbled pathetically over the phonics, and with a grimace exclaimed, "I can't." (Mendelsohn, 1973)

[...]

Comparing the texts with which his son was taught in the two schools he attended, this father commented:

'I know of no parent who would open a primer today with any intention other than to discover what his child is reading.'
[...]

The texts of the first grader in the yeshiva, on the other hand, are the identical readings explored daily by his parents and teachers. As a result of this perpetual and subtle set of reminders of the innate depth and potential of the subject matter he is pursuing, the phrases 'I have read' or 'I have already learnt' are never used, since finality is neither possible nor desirable.

Study is an ongoing process. The objective is to be continually involved with the text, not to outgrow it, because the material can never be fully mastered.

The boy, having been taught Hebrew for meaning and with complete disregard of whether some word by itself was easy or difficult, read it for meaning and was carried along by his understanding of it so that he could translate a difficult text. In public school he had been taught to decode laboriously simple English words in meaningless sequences. Since what he was made to read there had nothing to awaken his interest, he could read only the words he had learnt in class. He knew that no adult could possibly be interested in what he was reading in public school, so he could not work up any interest in it either. Well aware that adults were as interested as he in what he was reading in Hebrew school, if not more so, he found learning to read there a challenge which he met to the best of his ability. The significance of the text of the Bible invites every reader to seek his own meaning in what is written. From the moment he learns to read, the child is impressed that his teacher reads the same book innumerable times and always finds some new meaning in it. This challenges the child to do the same, and suggests to him that whatever meaning he finds in it is legitimate for him. What the text conveyed – as

This example demonstrates how a child can read a difficult text in Hebrew, and translate this into English very well. But when the child is asked to read the simplified English summary, he can't do so. Bettelheim and Zelan argue that this shows that difficult originals which still contain 'magic' to interest the learner, are better teaching texts than simplified summaries that have lost this magic. This is why primers (simple school reading books) aren't good books to use in the teaching of reading.

much as his teacher's and parents' attitude towards it – put the boy just mentioned under its spell as soon as he began to learn to read. With it, reading and literature attained magic connotations.

By comparison with the truly unlimited and deeply engrossing vistas the Bible opens up to the child, as Mendelsohn says,

'the public school system employs various elementary reading series which for all their claims to linguistic and literary advancement, really amount to little more than an updated Dick and Jane. What vistas, indeed, are made available to the child who is asked to develop an interest in reading, not to mention literature, by learning to read: "Janet. Mark. Janet and Mark. Come, Mark, come Mark, come. Come here, Mark. Come here. Come here, Mark. Come and jump. Come and jump, jump, jump. Here I come, Janet. Here I come. Jump, jump, jump"? This is the entire text of the first seven pages of the updated Janet and Mark pre-primer, which continues in the same vein.'

Pay attention to why the writers argue against the common school practice of developing simple readers (or primers) to teach young children reading. What do you think of their argument and the evidence they provide?

Because of its central importance, reading should be the paramount example of what education in the deepest sense is all about: a progress from irrationality to rationality, starting with the id's irrational purposes, which become gradually controlled by the ego and thus changed to meet in a rational manner the challenges of both external reality and the inner life.

If education equips students in this way, it enriches their personality and makes life more manageable and more worthwhile. But modern education – believing it can do away with the slow and tortuous development from irrationality to rationality – tends to deplete the ego of its natural resources and leave it weakened, subject to domination by an irrationality that has not been sufficiently transformed by the process of education.